

Thomas Jefferson to William A. Burwell, September 17, 1806, with Copy, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO W. A. BURWELL J. MSS.

Monticello, Sept. 17, 06.

Dear Sir, —Yours of Aug. 7, from Liberty, never got to my hands till the 9th instant. About the same time I received the *Enquirer*, in which Decius was so judiciously answered. The writer of that paper observed, that the matter of Decius¹ consisted, 1st of facts; 2dly, of inferences from these facts: that he was not well enough informed to affirm or deny his facts, & he therefore examines his inferences, and in a very masterly manner shews that even were his facts true, the, reasonable inferences from them are very different from those drawn by Decius. But his facts are far from truth, and should be corrected. It happened that Mr. Madison & Genl Dearborne were here when I received your letter. I therefore, with them, took up Decius & read him deliberately; & our memories aided one another in correcting his bold & unauthorized assertions. I shall note the most material of these in the order of the paper.

¹ “Decius” was the signature used by John Randolph to a series of papers in the *Richmond Examiner*.

1. It is grossly false that our ministers, as it is said in a note, had proposed to surrender our claims to compensation for Spanish spoliations, or even for French. Their instructions were to make no treaty in which Spanish spoliations were not provided for; and altho they were permitted to be silent as to French spoliations carried into Spanish ports, they were not

Library of Congress

expressly to abandon even them. 2. It is not true that our ministers, in agreeing to establish the Colorado as our Western boundary, had been obliged to exceed the authority of their instructions. Altho' we considered our title good as far as the Rio Bravo, yet in proportion to what they could obtain East of the Missipi, they were to relinquish to the Westward, & successive sacrifices were marked out, of which even the Colorado was not the last. 3. It is not true that the Louisiana treaty was antedated, lest Great Britain should consider our supplying her enemies with money as a breach of

neutrality. After the very words of the treaty were finally agreed to, it took some time, perhaps some days, to make out all the copies in the very splendid manner of Bonaparte's treaties. Whether the 30th of Apr., 1803, the date expressed, was the day of the actual compact, or that on which it was signed, our memories do not enable us to say. If the former, then it is strictly conformable to the day of the compact; if the latter, then it was postdated, instead of being antedated. The motive assigned too, is as incorrect as the fact. It was so far from being thought, by any party, a breach of neutrality, that the British minister congratulated Mr. King on the acquisition, & declared that the King had learned it with great pleasure; & when Baring, the British banker, asked leave of the minister to purchase the debt & furnish the money to France, the minister declared to him, that so far from throwing obstacles in the way, if there were any difficulty in the payment of the money, it was the interest of Great Britain to aid it. 4. He speaks of a double set of opinions & principles; the one ostensible, to go on the journals & before the public, the other efficient, and the real motives to action. But where are these double opinions and principles? The executive informed the legislature of the wrongs of Spain, & that preparation should be made to repel them, by force, if necessary. But as it might still be possible to negotiate a settlement, they asked such means as might enable them to meet the negotiation, whatever form it might take. The 1st part of this system was communicated publicly, the 2d privately; but both were equally official, equally involved the responsibility of the Executive, and were equally to go on the journals. 5. That the purchase of the Floridas

Library of Congress

was in direct opposition to the views of the executive, as expressed in the President's *official* communication. It was not in opposition even to the public

part of the communication, which did not recommend war, but only to be prepared for it. It perfectly harmonized with the private part, which asked the means of negotiation in such terms as covered the purchase of Florida as evidently as it was proper to speak it out. He speaks of secret communications between the executive and members, of backstairs' influence, &c. But he never spoke of this while he and Mr. Nicholson enjoyed it almost solely. But when he differed from the executive in a leading measure, & the executive, not submitting to him, expressed it's sentiments to others, the very sentiments (to wit, the purchase of Florida) which he acknowledges they expressed to him, then he roars out upon backstairs' influence. 6. The committee, he says, "forbore to recommend offensive measures." Is this true? Did not they recommend the raising—regiments? Besides, if it was proper for the comtee to forbear recommending offensive measures, was it not proper for the executive & Legislature to exercise the same forbearance? 7. He says Monroe's letter had a most important bearing on our Spanish relations. Monroe's letter related, almost entirely, to our British relations. Of those with Spain he knew nothing particular since he left that country. Accordingly, in his letter he simply expressed an opinion on our affairs with Spain, of which he knew we had better information than he could possess. His opinion was no more than that of any other sensible man; & his letter was proper to be communicated with the English papers, & with them only. That the executive did not hold it up on account of any bearing on Spanish affairs, is evident from the fact that it was communicated when the Senate had not yet entered on the Spanish affairs, & had not yet received the papers relating to them from the other House.

The moment the Representatives were ready to enter on the British affairs, Monroe's letter, which peculiarly related to them, and was *official* solely as to them, was communicated to both Houses, the Senate being then about entering on Spanish affairs.

Library of Congress

It remains now to consider on what authority these corrections of fact can be advanced without compromising the Executive. It would seem to be best that the writer should assume the mask of a member of the Legislature. As to the 1st & 2d articles it might be said that although the instructions to the ministers for the Spanish negotiation were never officially made known, yet that they were often the subject of conversation during the sessions at Washington, where it was understood that they were as above stated, however that if Decius pretends to know that they were not, let him bring forward his proofs, or avow the back-stairs information he received to the contrary. As to the 3d all the circumstances were freely mentioned by the different members of the administration in conversations during the session which confirmed the Louisiana treaty. No secret was made of them. The 4th, 5th & 6th require no proofs but what are public. The 7th may be affirmed in the assumed character of a member, without any danger of it's being denied.

These, my dear Sir, are the principal facts worth correction. Make any use of them you think best, without letting your source of information be known. Can you send me some cones or seeds of the cucumber tree? Accept affectionate salutations, & assurances of great esteem & respect.